

Pass Labs XA30.8

First rung on Pass Labs' 'XA' series of Class A amplifiers is a stereo model weighing in at a full 40kg, but don't let the seemingly parsimonious 30W rating fool you – this is a beast! Review: **Mark Craven** Lab: **Paul Miller**

In this era of all-in-one amplifiers and 'crossover' products, where even a tube amp might come to market with a built-in USB DAC [see p74], there's something refreshing about Californian brand Pass Labs. Now approaching 35 years in business and named after founder and chief designer Nelson Pass (also the man behind Threshold in the 1970s), the company has long been known for its focus on frill-free, performance-first designs. Yes, its current product catalogue spans 18 amplifiers, but all are analogue-only. If you're interested in digital inputs, network audio and touchscreen controls, you can move along. But stay, in the words of Pass Labs, for 'simplicity and power'.

Selling for £7850, in just the one (very smart) silver aluminium finish, the XA30.8 auditioned here is a power amp from the manufacturer's Class A range. It's a stereo design, positioned above the entry-level XA25 at £5595. Also in the lineup are no fewer than six monoblock amps, from the £15,700-per-pair XA60.8 to the dual-chassis Xs300 flagship, a set of two costing £92,500. Meanwhile, there are two mono and three stereo options in Pass Labs' Class AB series, plus three integrated amps, including the INT-25 [HFN Dec '20].

FIRST CLASS ACT

Nelson Pass's penchant for Class A goes back to Pass Labs' debut model, the Aleph 0 of 1991. This almost cube-shaped 75W/8ohm-rated monoblock operated as a single-ended, solid-state Class A amp, switching to a conventional push-pull topology toward its maximum output. Next up, beginning in 1998, were the X series amplifiers, with their patented 'Super-Symmetry' circuits enabling higher power outputs. These two families were then effectively merged to make Pass Labs' XA series, now into its third generation.

RIGHT: An Avel Lindberg toroid [bottom] feeds linear PSUs for the balanced line in/voltage stage [top] and Pass Labs' favoured current feedback power amp based on ten pairs of (20A) FETs per channel [on heatsinks, left/right]

The XA30.8, which the company says has been engineered to strike the 'optimal balance between performance and cost', is rated at 30W per channel. Both PM's boxout [p63] and Lab Report [p65] cover off why no one should take that specification at face value. And to this I will add that – just by looking at it – the XA30.8 appears destined to deliver a healthy dose of power. While certainly more 'compact' than Pass Labs' top-flight monoblocks, measuring 483x191x540mm (whd), it is still the sort of amplifier that is likely to be mounted on a platform between the loudspeakers rather than in a hi-fi rack.

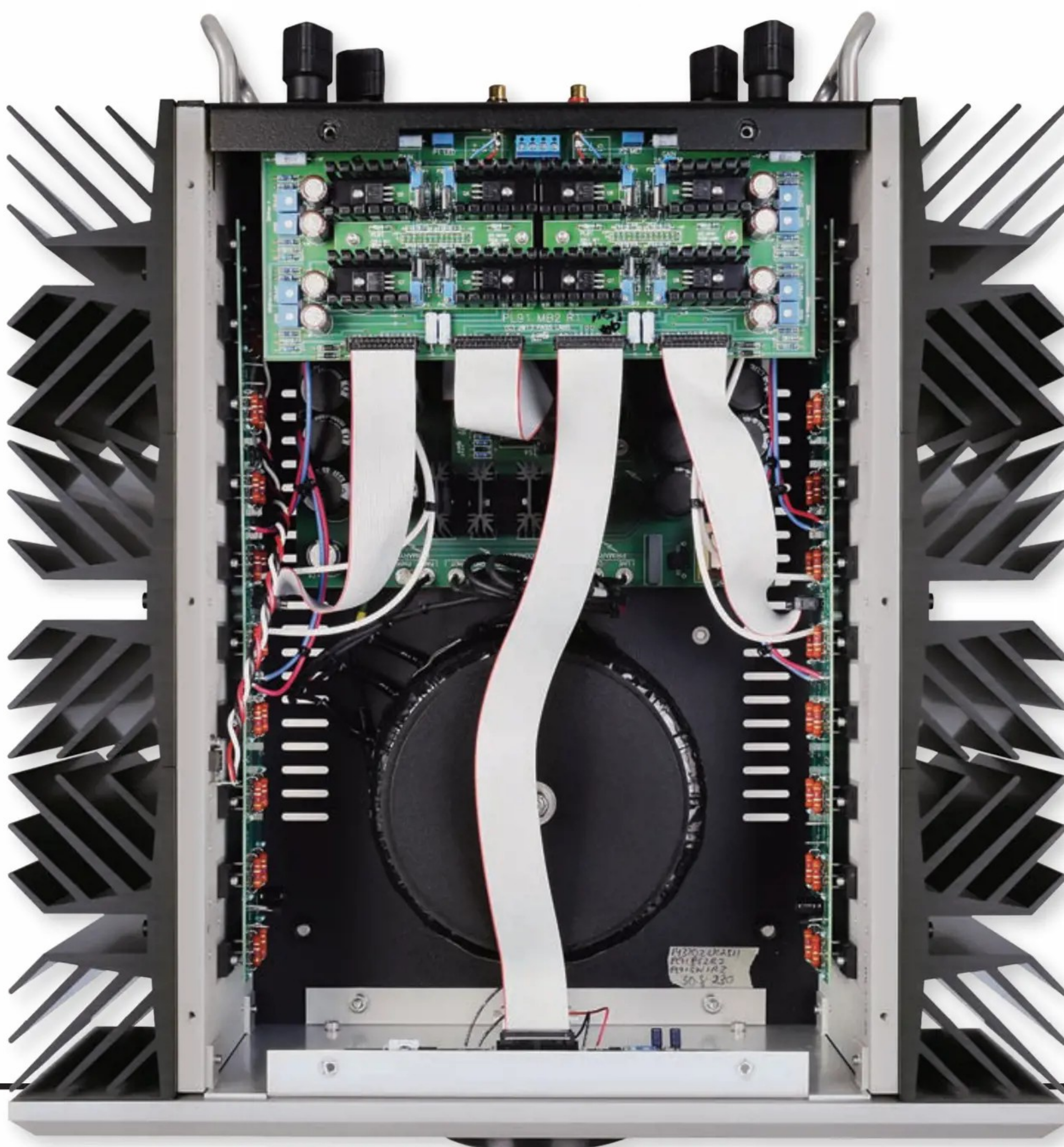
'Don't take the power specification at face value'

There's also its 40kg mass to consider, which comes not only from a large toroidal transformer centrally mounted between the XA30.8's two banks of 'high-biased'

MOSFETs [see pic, below] but the amp's solid casework, heatsinking, and machined aluminium fascia.

CONFIRMATION BIAS

The last of those has a lush hairline finish, but more eye-catching is the porthole display, which is not a traditional power meter but an indication of output stage bias. Subsequently, don't expect to see its black needle 'jumping around'. Oh, and its blue illumination cannot be dimmed. ➔



'The porthole display is not a traditional power meter but an indication of output stage bias'





There's nothing else on the XA30.8's front apart from an on/standby button and company logo, and there's a similar fuss-free feel to the amp's rear.

HEATSINKS 'N' LINKS

Indeed, a glance around the back reveals two useful carry handles, single-ended and balanced XLR inputs, a 12V trigger (for automated switch on via a connected preamp), a mains socket, and an on/off rocker. Improved over previous XA amps are the speaker binding posts, which are now widely spaced and feature a locking mechanism that makes it impossible to over-tighten – good news for owners of spade-terminated cables.

Pass Labs suggests a clearance of around 6in is necessary to manage heat dissipation from the XA30.8's side-mounted heatsinks. These large, sculpted patterns of metal do a good job. After a couple of hours' usage, the amp was running reasonably warm, but without any discernible hotspots, though

the power consumption when idling was more than 250W...

For a partnering preamp, Pass Labs sells four line-level models and three phono units. Of the former, the entry-level XP 12 is perhaps the XA30.8's most obvious companion, a single-box model available for £6595. Step up to the £10,895 XP 22 for a twin-chassis preamp, with dual mono power supply housed in an external chassis. For our review, however, BAT VK-90 [HFN Jun '25] and Constellation Revelation 2 [HFN Jan '25] preamps were used, with the flagship dCS Varèse DAC/streamer [HFN Feb '25] and Marantz SACD 10 [HFN Jun '25] as sources.

'Scott Travis's kick drums enjoyed solidity and real slam'



NO STRAIN, ALL GAIN

Anyone sniffy about the XA30.8's modest 2x30W rating will soon have their nose wiped. In the HFN listening room, with both DALI Epikore 11 floorstanders [HFN Feb '25] and B&W 801 D4 Signatures [HFN Sep '23], there was no sign of strain at the

ABOVE: The machined alloy front panel, solid chassis and massive heatsinking reflect a very functional 'this means business' aesthetic. Even the on/off button is milled from alloy...

levels needed to 'fill' the large space. Just the impression of ample power, married to sweetness and warmth. It's a moreish sound that steers clear of brightness and glare, but not so soft as to miss out on transient attack and musical drama. The XA30.8 also digs deep with relish, sounding rich and weighty in the bass. That £7850 asking price looks like a bargain.

Felix Laband's 'Black Shoes' [Dark Days Exit, Compost Records; CD resolution] begins with a metronomic, two-note bass line that acts as the building block to a sparse, minimalistic instrumental. There are tinkling bells in each channel and stylised, electronic percussion. Delicately resolved effects, including splashes of water, sent the music skywards. But really notable here was the bounce that the XA30.8 brought to the bottom octaves, ensuring the track sounded both large and alive.

Previous experience of Pass Labs amplification has shown the brand has a way with the low-end and throughout the listening sessions, the XA30.8 delivered big drums, electronic swells, and electric and acoustic bass guitars with ease.

FROM PLUCK TO PUMMEL

The upright bass that kicks off Rickie Lee Jones' 'Easy Money' [eponymous; Warner Bros. Records 256 628] was precisely drawn, with clear plucks and a gentle resonance, to match the smooth vocals and fine-as-you-like guitar strings.

With Judas Priest's 'The Serpent And The King', from *Invincible Shield* [Columbia; 48kHz/24-bit], the amplifier gave a display of controlled aggression. Drummer Scott Travis opts for an all-guns-blazing approach to match the lightning-fast guitar riffs, and the clear beats of his kick drum(s) enjoyed ➞

POWER PLAY

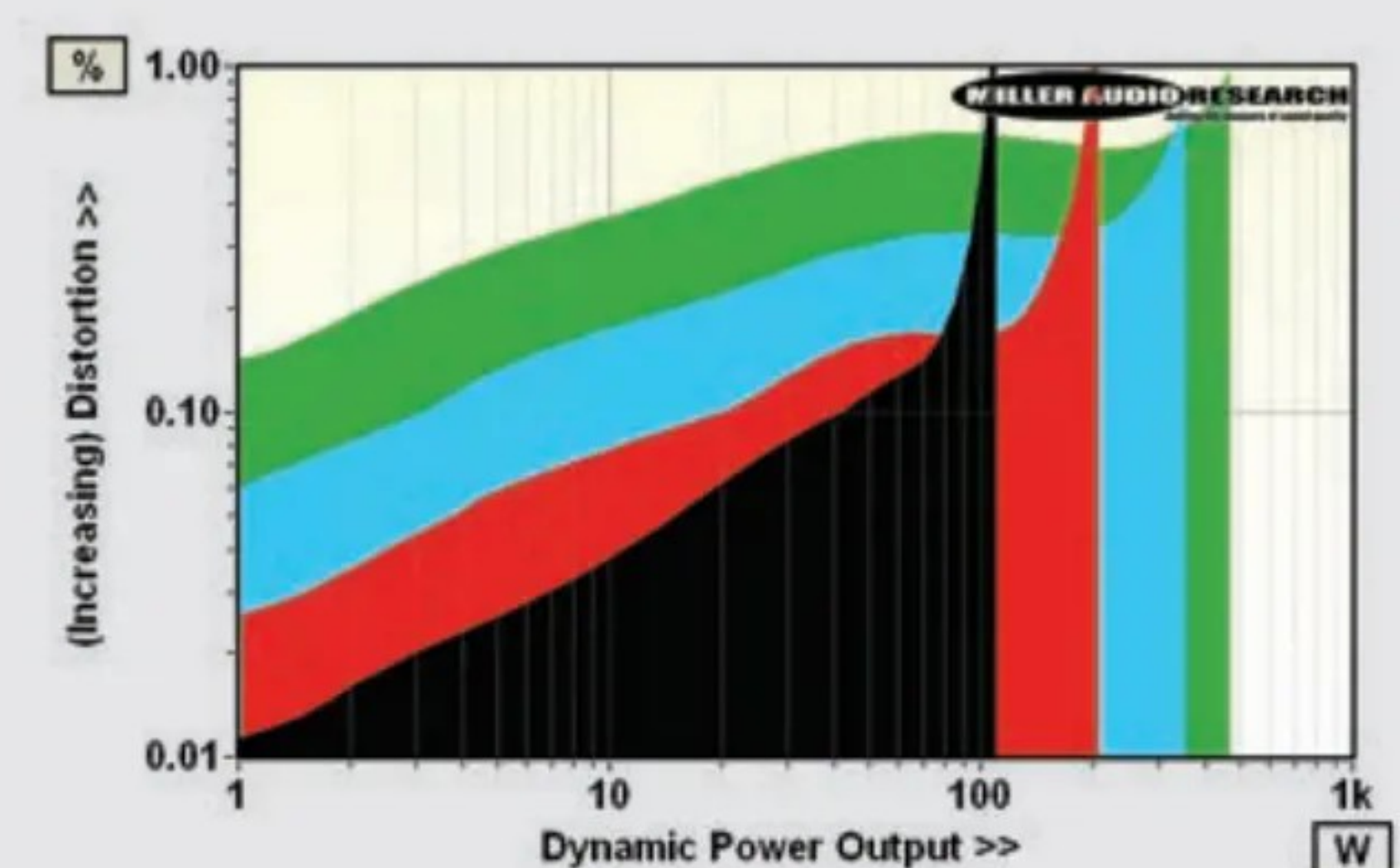
In my Welcome page [HFN Jun '25] I touched upon the reliability of amplifier manufacturers' power specifications, but not those that rate their amps to within the skin of their transistors, with a following wind and the maximum possible AC mains voltage. No... I was talking about those that either approach specification with a (small 'c') conservatism or, equally likely, where there's a breakdown in communication between the engineering and marketing departments. Either way it results in inaccurate power ratings being propagated as 'facts' by the online herd, potentially leading to enthusiasts overlooking or discounting models that do not meet a particular performance threshold for their partnering loudspeakers. Pass Labs is just one of those brands that runs the risk of being overlooked for 'lack of power'. That would be unfortunate, and a mistake, because its ratings regularly fail to reflect the true speaker-wrestling grunt of its amplifiers. Just as the X150.5 was rated at 150W but delivered 250W/8ohm [HFN Feb '07], the 60W-spec'd XA60.5 delivered 129W/8ohm [HFN Apr '10] and the INT-25 was rated at 25W but maintained 68W/8ohm, so too does the XA30.8 smash both specification [see p65] and expectation... PM

PASS LABS XA30.8

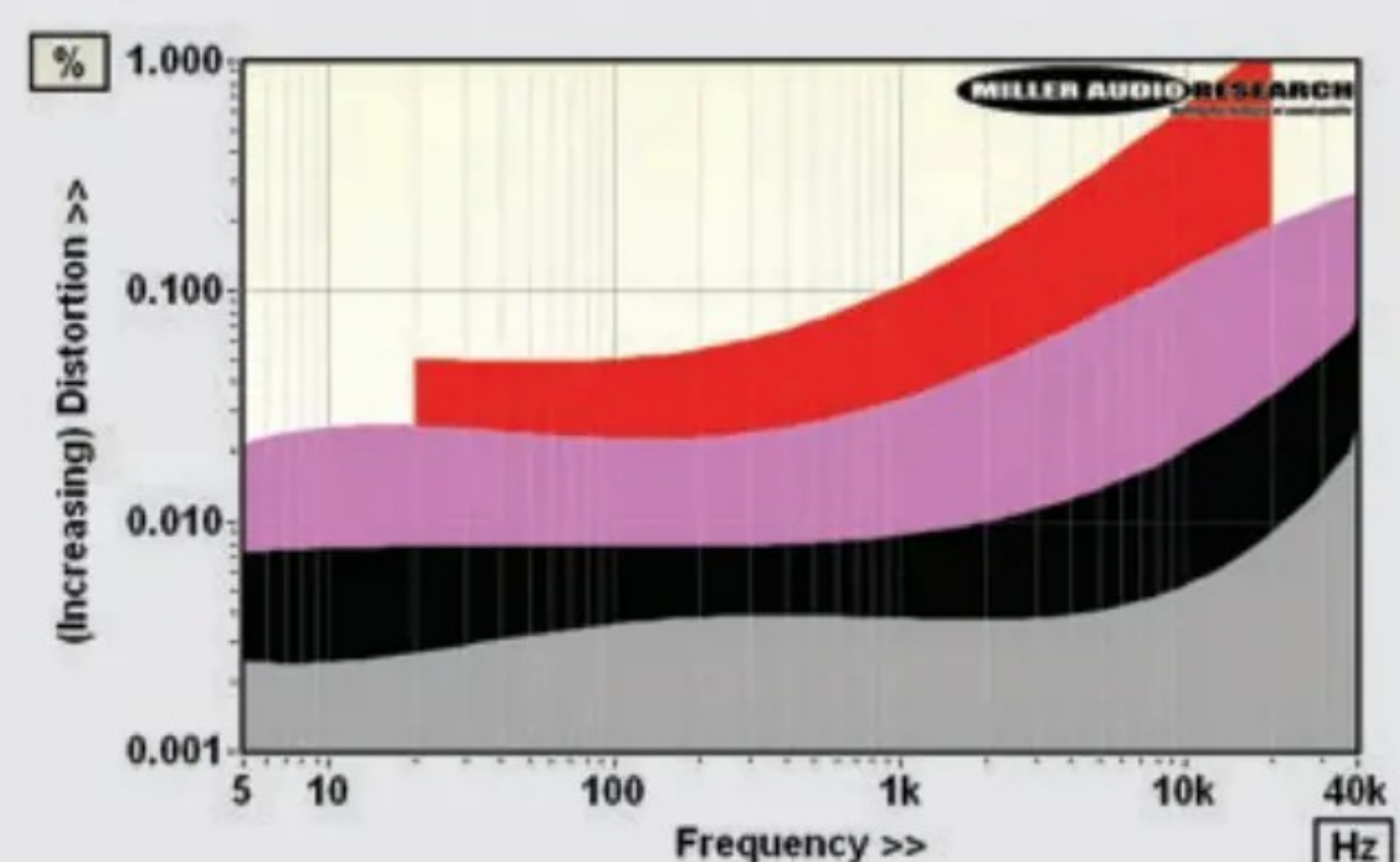
In common with Pass Labs' previous-generation XA60.5 amplifier [HFN Apr '10], this latest 'entry-level' stereo power amp vastly exceeds its rated output power, the 30W specification bested to the tune of 2x94W/8ohm and 2x156W/4ohm. Moreover, there's headroom to accommodate 105W, 205W, 357W and 470W (21.7A) into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads, respectively, up to 1% THD under dynamic conditions [see Graph 1, below]. In practice the 30W specification better reflects the envelope of its claimed Class A operation – and with an idle power draw of 265W and ambient heatsink temperature of 45°C this is not unrealistic.

Nevertheless, also in common with earlier Pass Labs amps and also visible from Graph 1, the XA30.8's distortion trend increases gently with power output from 0.01%/1W to 0.038%/10W and up to 0.078% at the rated 30W, subsequently lifting to 0.09%/45W above which there's a slight 'knee' in THD to 0.12%/50W and 0.8%/80W (all re. 1kHz/8ohm). That kink at 45W probably represents the true Class A to A/B transition. Versus frequency this same gentle increase in THD with increasing output is maintained [see Graph 2, below]. From 0.0029-0.009% at 100mW/8ohm to 0.058-1.26% at 50W/8ohm (all 20Hz-20kHz) this colour, favoured by many audiophiles, is seemingly a hallmark of Nelson Pass's proven complementary, current feedback power amp topology.

The A-wtd S/N is slightly above average at 88.5dB (re. 0dBW) but output impedance is not especially low at 0.185-0.21ohm (20Hz-20kHz) so there may be some modification of response depending on the attached speaker load. Into a non-inductive 8ohm load the XA30.8 has -1dB points at <1Hz-76kHz. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Maximum current is 21.7A



ABOVE: Distortion versus frequency versus power output (0.1W grey; 1W, black; 10W, pink; 50W, red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm) | 94W / 156W |
| Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm) | 105W / 205W / 357W / 470W |
| Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz) | 0.185-0.21ohm / 0.78ohm |
| Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz) | -0.0dB to -0.12dB/-1.6dB |
| Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/30W) | 137mV / 765mV |
| A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/30W) | 88.5dB / 103.3dB |
| Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm) | 0.022-0.18% |
| Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p) | 265W / 321W |
| Dimensions (WHD) / Weight (each) | 483x191x540mm / 40kg |



ABOVE: The XA30.8 is equipped with custom 4mm speaker outputs that apply a pre-set torque to spades and bare cable. Inputs are on RCAs and balanced XLRs

solid – if not quite gut-punching – slam. Listening at a volume level suited to this legendary rock band, the XA30.8 didn't appear to be out of its comfort zone.

WIDESCREEN WONDER

The Pass Labs amp also impressed with its soundstaging. Playing Fleetwood Mac's 'Gold Dust Woman', performed live at LA's Fabulous Forum in 1977 [Rumours Live, Rhino Records; 96kHz/24-bit], it was a doddle to visualise Stevie Nicks standing front and centre, her vibrato vocals ahead of keyboards and bass as Lindsey Buckingham chopped out chords on his guitar. There was an airy, deep feel to this rendition, while switching to the in-the-studio original tightened yet widened the stage.

The XA30.8 confidently replicated the wide view of the orchestra in the Berliner Philharmoniker/von Karajan recording of Ravel's Boléro [DG; 96kHz/24-bit], and the timbral differences between the woodwind instruments that carry its jazz-like melody. The crescendo, with blasts of brass and snare drums, sounded big and thrilling – words that also fit the amp's handling of 'Seven Angels Of Vengeance', from James Horner's suite for the 2016 remake of *The Magnificent Seven* [Sony Classical 88985346202]. On this piece the staging was again superb, evoking the wide, open plains of the Old West. In other words: Yee-haw!

What Pass Labs' XA30.8 offers is a performance both big-hearted and enveloping, yet able to accentuate finer details. It sits well off 'neutral', but remains vivid in the midrange. The vocals of London Grammar's Hannah Reid, during the perennial hi-fi demo 'Hey Now' [If You Wait; MADART1], were clear and nuanced, even with the track's generous reverb. The amp dug deep into the

dual vocals in Hans Theessink and Terry Evans' 'Got To Keep Moving' [Visions, Blue Groove; CD res], Evans' baritone in particular being packed with inflection and character.

In a section of the XA30.8's manual, Nelson Pass explains that a good deal of his company's evaluation processes are based around listening rather than measuring. If you wanted an amplifier that's an utter pleasure to listen to, while not warranting the term 'transparent', then this is it.

The sound of Theessink and

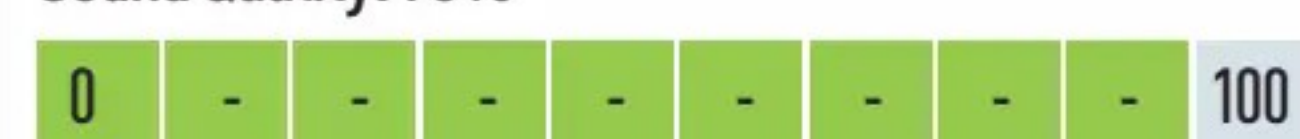
Evans' guitars sent me off on a country-blues tangent, so Tony Joe White's 'Polk Salad Annie' [Black And White, Rhino Records; 96kHz/24-bit] was soon tumbling from the DALI Epikore 11

speakers, followed by The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's 'Tennessee Stud' [Will The Circle Be Unbroken, Capitol Nashville; CD res] with its beautifully recorded vocal and thick instrumentation. And this might be the Pass Labs amp's vital attribute – it puts nothing between you and the music, while the sound, sweet but with a steely spine, is ripe for listening long into the night. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Nelson Pass's reputation as an amplifier designer *par excellence* isn't threatened by the XA30.8. This near 'entry-level' stereo amp offers the finely detailed, approachable sounds expected of Class A operation, without shying away from the business of driving your speakers. It's a performance that should put a smile on the face of all audiophiles, bar those obsessed with 'clinical neutrality', and for a sane price.

Sound Quality: 90%



'Brass and snare drums sounded big and thrilling'